The period once known as the Dark Ages – from 500 to 1066 – is where we find the origins of a surprising number of our place names, villages and counties, particularly in England. This was an age of migration and invasion, of religious and political upheaval, and its traces can still be read in the landscape today.

By 500 AD, Germanic tribes from Northern Europe had arrived from across the sea. The Anglo-Saxons, as they are now known, lived in the shadow of the past. The stone cities, bridges and roads of the Romans stood empty in the landscape, crumbling over time but still imposing – the ‘work of giants’ as the Anglo-Saxons called them. Other man-made structures were far older: earthworks from Iron Age hillforts to Neolithic standing stones. Anglo-Saxon impressions of this multi-layered landscape are preserved in many of their Old English place names, and these are the names we still use today. ‘Chester’ derives from the Old English ceaster, which the Anglo-Saxons called them. Other man-made structures were far older: earthworks from Iron Age hillforts to Neolithic standing stones. Anglo-Saxon impressions of this multi-layered landscape are preserved in many of their Old English place names, and these are the names we still use today. ‘Chester’ derives from the Old English ceaster, which the Anglo-Saxons called them.

Offa’s Dyke
Built by the king of Mercia in the late 8th century, Offa’s Dyke is a defensive earthwork that runs for 150 miles near the Anglo-Welsh border. A testament of power and control, the dyke is still imposing today, and can be walked as part of a long-distance footpath. For a shorter walk (7 miles), try the Devil’s Dyke in Cambridgeshire, part of a series of defensive earthworks built in the late 6th century near the boundaries between the kingdoms of East Anglia and Mercia.

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500 – 1066 EARLY MEDIEVAL

DARK AGE BRITAIN

After the end of Roman Britain, the land became a melting pot of Britons, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings – all of whom variously shaped the character of our countryside, says Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough.

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to Chichester, from Colchester to Worcester, the Anglo-Saxons were marking out these places as the remnants of a bygone age.

The Anglo-Saxons weren’t the only inhabitants of Britain at this time. The oldest layers of place names – often connected to prominent features such as rivers and mountains – kept their Brittonic names, given to them by those who were already living there when the Anglo-Saxons arrived. The multiple River Avons dotted across England and Scotland come from the Brittonic word *abona*, simply meaning ‘river’.

Other place names hint at a multicultural landscape, with Anglo-Saxons and Britons living close to each other: from the Old English word sceall ‘foreigner’ we get Walsall and Walton, as well as the Brittonic territories and kingdoms of Cornwall and Wales. A Brittonic hallabry, possibly from Cumbria, provides a snapshot of the countryside as a hunting resource. As baby Dinogad lies snugly wrapped in pine marten furs, his mother sings, “when your father used to go to the mountain, he would bring back a roebuck, a wild pig, a stag, a speckled grouse from the mountain, a fish from the waterfall”.

The Anglo-Saxons inherited a farmed and managed countryside. This was an open landscape, not a system of regularly spaced villages, but timber buildings dotted through the countryside with infields for growing crops such as barley and oats. Beyond these fields were meadows for grazing cattle and other livestock, while woodlands provided fuel, building materials, and land where pigs could be put out to pannage.

Beyond the farmed lands were different terrains: moorlands, chalk downs, coasts, fens. As seen through Anglo-Saxon eyes, some were more attractive than others. When St Guthlac founded Crowland Abbey in the Lincolnshire badlands, it was in a “fideous fen of huge bigness”, where he lived in an ancient burial mound and was apparently assaulted by demons. Even so, the fens provided fish, waterfowl, peat and rushes, and many of the great monastic houses sprung up there, including Ely (which means ‘Eel Island’) and Belcham (which means ‘slope of the spectre demon’ in Old English). Those living near Drakelow (Derbyshire) should beware of the heathen god Woden, since his name is associated with these places, while residents of Wanborough (Wiltshire) and Wodneslawe (Bedfordshire) should keep a close eye out for the spectre or demon ‘wealh wearn’, ‘foreigner’ wealh meaning ‘foreigner’ we get Walsall and Walton, as well as the Brittonic territories and kingdoms of Cornwall and Wales. A Brittonic hallabry, possibly from Cumbria, provides a snapshot of the countryside as a hunting resource. As baby Dinogad lies snugly wrapped in pine marten furs, his mother sings, “when your father used to go to the mountain, he would bring back a roebuck, a wild pig, a stag, a speckled grouse from the mountain, a fish from the waterfall”.

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Modern place names can tell us about the Anglo-Saxon’s imaginative landscape – the supernatural creatures they believed to inhabit the groves and valleys. Just outside Durham there is a village called Shincliffe, which means ‘slope of the spectre or demon’ in Old English. Those living near Wardborough (Wiltshire) and Wodneslawe (Bedfordshire) should keep a close eye out for the heathen god Woden, since his name is associated with these places, while residents of Wanborough (Wiltshire) and Wodneslawe (Bedfordshire) should keep a close eye out for the spectre or demon ‘wealh wearn’, ‘foreigner’ wealh meaning ‘foreigner’ we get Walsall and Walton, as well as the Brittonic territories and kingdoms of Cornwall and Wales. A Brittonic hallabry, possibly from Cumbria, provides a snapshot of the countryside as a hunting resource. As baby Dinogad lies snugly wrapped in pine marten furs, his mother sings, “when your father used to go to the mountain, he would bring back a roebuck, a wild pig, a stag, a speckled grouse from the mountain, a fish from the waterfall”.

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“Compared to the Romans, early medieval culture lay lightly on the land”

century, and in 865 a Scandinavian force swept through England, toppling kingdoms. They came as invaders, but they stayed as settlers with families and farms.

In the year 876, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the land of the Northumbrians was shared out between the Nordic newcomers, who “proceeded to plough and support themselves”. After King Alfred beat back the invaders, the peace treaty he drew up with the Viking leader Guthrum is so clearly embedded in the landscape that it can still be traced today. It begins with the boundaries agreed between Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian territories: “They shall run up the Thames, and then up the Lea, and along the Lea to its source, then in a straight line to Bedford, and then up the Ouse to Watling Street”.

North of this line, in areas heavily settled by the Scandinavians – East Anglia, the East Midlands and Yorkshire – modern place names once given by the Norse settlers tell us how they viewed the land and its resources. The easiest way to tell there was once a Scandinavian farming the land is to look for place names ending in ‘-by’, the Old Norse word for ‘farmstead’ or ‘village’. So Grimsby was once a farm belonging to someone called Grim, Wetherby was a sheep farm, and Selby was a farm with willow trees.

EMERGENCE OF VILLAGES

From the middle of the 10th century, the landscape of England began to change, as the population grew and the distinction between urban and rural areas became clearer. Villages of the sort we might recognise today – evenly spaced houses with strips of cultivated fields beyond – started to appear, often centred around a manor or church.

After the Normans arrived in 1066, this process accelerated, shaping the countryside into an even more recognisable form. New stone structures sprung up, visible across the landscape: motte and bailey castles and Romanesque cathedrals. Written two decades after William the Conqueror came to power, the Domesday Book gives us a sense of the English countryside as a worked landscape of fields, pastures and meadows, common land for grazing, woodland for fuel and fences. Tracts of wooded and non-wooded land were being placed under ‘Forest Law’ and set aside so the king and his nobles could hunt venison. Further north, during William’s decade-long campaign to bring the country to heel, cattle and crops had been burnt, famine ravaged the land, and the Domesday Book lists estate after estate reduced to wasteland.

Compared to the Romans and the Normans with their great stone buildings and infrastructure, early medieval culture lay lightly on the land. But its legacy is far more present than we might realise, shaping how we understand its boundaries and divisions, its field systems, its deep history. And more often than we realise, when we speak the place names that surround us, we are conjuring the former inhabitants of the countryside who lived there over a thousand years ago, whether Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians or Britons.

Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough is Associate Professor in Medieval History at Durham University, and author of Beyond the Northlands: Viking Voyages and the Old Norse Sagas (OUP, 2018).
WHERE TO SEE KEY SAXON AND VIKING SITES

1. **Wansdyke** Wiltshire and Somerset
   Its name associated with the pagan god Woden (Woden's Dyke), sections of this earthwork stretch for 35 miles through the West Country. In some places the bank is 13 feet high and the ditch over eight feet deep, and it may have been built both to defend territory and control trade and transport in the region.

2. **Gosforth Cross** Cumbria
   Dating to the 900s, the Gosforth Cross stands in St Mary's churchyard. It blends Christian imagery – such as the crucifixion of Christ – with images of pagan Norse gods: Loki bound and tortured, Thor wrestling the Midgard Serpent, Vidar forcing apart the jaws of the monstrous wolf Fenrir. Open daily. Gosforth, CA20 1AZ.

3. **Sutton Hoo** Suffolk
   The most famous Anglo-Saxon site of all: a sumptuous 6th-century ship burial mound. The powerful King Rædwald of East Anglia is thought to be the occupant. Finds here include the famous Sutton Hoo helmet (British Museum). £9.80. Open daily. Woodbridge, IP12 3DJ. 01394 389700, nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo

4. **Jorvik Viking Centre** Yorkshire
   Following the discovery of timber buildings, workshops, privies, pits, pottery, metalwork and bones from Viking Age York, the Jorvik Viking Centre was established 1984. Travel back in time to experience the sights, smells and sounds of the town. £11. Open daily. York, YO1 9WT 01904 615 505, jorvikvikingcentre.co.uk

5. **Lindisfarne Priory** Northumberland
   The priory on the tidal island of Lindisfarne was an important Celtic Christian centre from the 6th century, home to the Lindisfarne Gospels. In 793 AD it saw the first major Viking raid, sending shockwaves through Europe. £6.80. Open daily. TD15 2RX. 01289 389200, english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/lindisfarne-priory

6. **Jarrow Hall** Northumberland
   Discover the life of 7th-century monk and chronicler, Bede, who lived at Jarrow monastery. Here you can walk around the reconstructed village and farm, visit the rare-breed animals, and explore the nearby ruins of the Anglo-Saxon monastery. £5. Open Tues to Sun. Jarrow NE32 3DY. 0191 424 1585, jarrowhall.org.uk

7. **Maldon** Essex
   Down on the Blackwater Estuary, this is the site of a famous battle fought between the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings in 991 AD, commemorated in the Old English poem, The Battle of Maldon. The Anglo-Saxons lost, but the poem is embedded in the physical landscape, and clearly written by someone who knew the area and its inhabitants.

8. **St Gregory’s Minster** Yorkshire
   This late Anglo-Saxon church has a sundial with an inscription that begins “Orm, son of Gamal, bought St Gregory’s Minster when it was all ruined and collapsed…” ‘Orm’ and ‘Gamal’ are Norse names, although the inscription is written in Old English, suggesting they assimilated into the local culture. Kirkdale, YO62 7HF

9. **Alfred the Great’s Walls, Wareham** Dorset
   During King Alfred’s struggles against the Vikings in the late 9th century, Wareham became one of his fortified towns, surrounded by defensive earthworks that can still be seen (and walked along) today. Fortified towns were key to Alfred’s ultimate success.